



Georg Hodel (center) with Rep. Waters and drug witness Miranda in Nicaragua

◆Hung Out to Dry: 'Dark Alliance' Series Dies

By Georg Hodel

The "Dark Alliance" contra-crack series, which I co-reported with Gary Webb, has died with less a bang or a whimper than a gloat from the mainstream press.

"The *San Jose Mercury News* has apparently had enough of reporter Gary Webb and his efforts to prove that the CIA was involved in the sale of crack cocaine," rejoiced *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz, who wrote some of the harshest attacks on Webb. "Editors at the California newspaper have yanked Webb off the story and told him they will not publish his follow-up articles. They have also moved to transfer Webb from the state capital bureau in Sacramento to a less prestigious suburban office in Cupertino." [WP, June 11, 1997]

Webb got the bad news on June 5, from executive editor Jerry Ceppos. He had turned against the series several weeks earlier with a personal column declaring that the stories "fell short of my standards" and failed to handle the "gray areas" with sufficient care. [SJM, May 11, 1997]

In killing the follow-up stories, Ceppos said *Mercury News* editors had reservations about the credibility of a principal Webb source, apparently a reference to convicted cocaine trafficker Carlos Cabezas who has claimed that a CIA agent oversaw the transfer of drug profits to the contras. Ceppos also complained that Webb had gotten too close to the story.

Ceppos ordered Webb to the paper's San Jose headquarters the next day to learn about his future with the newspaper. On June 6, as that final decision was coming

down, I called Ceppos to protest. I wanted him to understand the human as well as journalistic costs of what he was doing, not just to Webb but to other journalists associated with the story in Nicaragua, where I have worked for more than a decade.

I thought he should know that his decision to distance himself from the "Dark Alliance" series -- combined with earlier attacks from major American newspapers -- had increased the dangers to me and others who have been pursuing this story in the field.

Just as Webb has been under personal attack in the United States, I have faced efforts from former contras to tear down my reputation in Nicaragua. Ex-contras also have harassed Nicaraguan reporters who tried to follow up the contra-cocaine evidence.

In one paid advertisement, Oscar Danilo Blandon, a drug trafficker who has admitted donating some cocaine profits to the contras in the early 1980s, called me a "pseudo-journalist" and accused me of having some unspecified links to an "international communist organization." Blandon also accused Nicaraguan reporters from *El Nuevo Diario* of "trying to manipulate" members of the U.S. Congress looking into the contra-cocaine charges.

Former contra chief Adolfo Calero declared in an article in *La Tribuna* what he thought should be done to these politically suspect Nicaraguan and foreign reporters. He used metaphorical language that refers to leftist Nicaraguan journalists as "deer" and fellow-traveling foreign reporters as "antelopes." "The deer are going to be finished

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off," Calero wrote on Feb. 2. "In this case, the antelopes as well." As a Swiss journalist, I would be an "antelope."

Less subtly, there have been threatening phone calls to my office. In late May, a male voice shouted obscenities at me over the phone and threatened to "screw" my wife who is a Nicaraguan lawyer representing Enrique Miranda, one of the Nicaraguan cocaine traffickers who has spoken with congressional investigators.

Earlier I had sent Ceppos a letter which complained that his May 11 "column provoked ... a series of very unfortunate reactions that seriously affect my working environment and exposes unintentionally everybody here who has been involved in this investigation." In the phone conversation on June 6, Ceppos first denied having received the letter, but then admitted that he had it. Still, he refused my request that the letter be published.

My appeal also did not stop Ceppos from informing Webb later that day that the investigative reporter would be transferred to a suburban office 150 miles from his home where he and his wife are raising three young children. That would mean that Webb would have to relocate from Sacramento or not see his family during the work week. The message was clear and Webb did not miss its significance: he saw the transfer as a clear message that the *Mercury News* wanted him to quit.

The retribution against Webb was a sad end to the "Dark Alliance" series which has been enveloped in controversy since it was published in August 1996. The series linked contra-cocaine shipments in the early 1980s to a Los Angeles drug pipeline that first mass-marketed "crack" cocaine to inner-city neighborhoods.

The series drew especially strong reactions from the African-American community which was devastated by the crack epidemic. In fall 1996, however, *The Washington Post* and other major newspapers began attacking the series for alleged overstatements. The papers also mocked African-Americans for supposedly being susceptible to baseless "conspiracy theories."

The furor obscured the fact that "Dark Alliance" built upon more than a decade of evidence amassed by journalists, congressional investigators and agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration who found numerous connections between the contras and drug traffickers. Some of that evidence was compiled in a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee report issued in 1989. Other pieces came out during the Iran-contra scandal and still more during the drug-trafficking trial of Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega in 1991.

But the contras always were defended by the Reagan-Bush administrations which saw the guerrillas as a necessary geo-political counterweight to the leftist Sandinista government that ruled Nicaragua in the 1980s. With a few

exceptions, the mainstream media joined the White House in protecting the contras -- and the CIA -- on the drug-trafficking evidence. [For more details about the controversy, see Robert Parry's *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine & Other Crimes* or *I.F. Magazine*, July-August 1997]

Still, from time to time, even *The Washington Post* has acknowledged legitimate concerns about contra drug trafficking. Last fall, for instance, after blasting "Dark Alliance" in a multi-story barrage, the *Post* ran a front-page article describing how Medellin cartel trafficker George Morales "contributed at least two airplanes and \$90,000 to" one of the contra groups operating in Costa Rica. The story quoted contra leaders Octaviano Cesar and Adolfo "Popo" Chamorro as admitting receipt of the contributions. They insisted that they had cleared the transactions with their contact at the CIA. [WP, Oct. 31, 1996]

The *Post* did not mention the name of that contact, an omission that angered Chamorro. He told me that the CIA man was Alan Fiers, who served as chief of the CIA's Central American Task Force in the mid-1980s. Fiers has denied any illicit involvement with drug traffickers, although he acknowledged knowing about the cocaine problem. He testified to Iran-contra investigators that he knew that among the Costa Rican-based contras, drug trafficking involved "not a couple of people. It was a lot of people."

While admitting some truth to the contra-cocaine allegations, the *Post* story stopped short of any self-criticism about the newspaper's failure to expose the contra-drug problem in the 1980s as the cocaine was entering the United States. In the Oct. 31, 1996, story, the *Post* only noted that "a broad congressional inquiry from 1986 to 1988 ... found that CIA and other officials may have chosen to overlook evidence that some contra groups were engaged in the drug trade or were cooperating with traffickers."

The *Post* then added obliquely: "But that probe caused little stir when its report was released" in 1989. With that indirect phrasing, the *Post* seemed to be shunting off blame for the "little stir" onto the congressional report. The newspaper did not explain why it buried the Senate report's explosive findings on page A20. [WP, April 14, 1989]. Instead of admitting failure to protect the American people from traffickers, the *Post* and other big papers continued to focus on alleged flaws in "Dark Alliance."

When that drumbeat of criticism began last fall, Ceppos initially defended the series. He backed our reporting in a letter to the *Post* (which the newspaper refused to publish). But the weight of the attacks from major newspapers and conservative journalism reviews eventually softened up the *Mercury News*. Inside the paper, young staffers feared that the controversy could hurt their chances of getting hired by bigger newspapers. Senior editors fretted about their careers in the Knight-Ridder chain, which owns the *Mercury News*.